

NLADA Future of Technology Montana Video Conferencing

1. Explain the project or innovation (what is it; what technology was used; whom does it serve; who are the partners).

While the use of video conferencing is nothing new to Legal Services programs, Montana Legal Services Association uses video conferencing in a somewhat unique manner. MLSA's pilot project places a lawyer – *via* video conferencing – in a remote location to represent a client in a courtroom. Naturally, the system can be used to interview and counsel a client at long distances but its main purpose is to provide direct representation before a judge in a courtroom setting. At present, MLSA now uses the equipment in one county. Six additional counties are now "on-line," and another six to eight should be added by the end of the year. Nearly all courthouses in Montana should be wired by the end of 2003, presenting significant opportunities for expansion.

2. What was the reason for the innovation? What problem was it designed to address?

MLSA chose to use video conferencing because MLSA, like many other Legal Services programs, is running low on resources, both people and money. MLSA seeks ways to provide a remote presence without the time and expense of travel. MLSA routinely uses videoconferencing for client interviews, witness preparation, depositions, etc. MLSA plans to also use this technology for other public education endeavors as part of a VISTA project.

3. What has been the benefit for the field and program? What has it delivered for you?

While the project is still in its infancy, the major short-term benefit has been to expand services to an area of a rural state where MLSA has not previously had a significant presence. Direct client services have expanded in small, but steady, increments. The potential, for client representation in remote areas is important to MLSA.

4. What barriers did you encounter in implementing or creating the program?

Barriers have been few and have not, surprisingly enough, been in the technology area. Civil Procedure Rules and evidence rules are the single most difficult impediment. MLSA is working to generate proposed rule changes to make videoconferencing more available for the use for non-party witnesses. Judicial support and involvement is essential to make the project function well.

5. What kind of commitment did this project take financially, for your staff, etc?

Without the LSC TIG grant, MLSA would not have been able to enter into the project. The per unit cost for the video conferencing equipment would have been prohibitive. On the other hand, MLSA's collaborative partnerships have brought the online costs to

reasonable and sustainable limits, at least in the short run. Staff time is mostly for the project attorney and the time to administer the project [reporting and accounting]. Once the project attorney is no longer with MLSA, other staff will be able to use video conferencing without too much difficulty, except for the loss of one staff member.

6. What do you see this project going in the future?

MLSA views the project's future as a key element in the delivery of services in Montana. With diminishing resources and great distances in a rural state, videoconferencing is a cost effective and efficient way to provide services to clients in remote areas. The cost is sustainable for the current locations, although without partnership help, the on line cost remains prohibitive on a statewide basis.